

The Evangelical Mind

Life is More than Work

By Richard Mouw

Red-eye flights are becoming more popular, according to a recent USA Today survey. There was a time not long ago when a passenger boarding a late night coast-to-coast flight could expect to stretch out over three seats in the coach section. Not so these days. Many night-time flights are solidly booked. One internet manager is quoted as saying that he takes all-night transcontinental flights because it lets him work full days without having to "blow a whole day traveling." The story suggests that this phenomenon has to do with changing attitudes toward work in our "new economy."

There may be something about high-tech culture that promotes these attitudes, but much of it strikes me as plain old-fashioned obsessiveness. I know the feeling. In a few weeks, I will leave a day of meetings in Southern California to fly all night to Charlotte, N.C., for a conference that begins first thing in the morning. I took on both assignments knowing that only a red-eye flight would allow it. The trustees who monitor my work as a seminary president tell me not to do this kind of thing. But I sometimes ignore their (and my wife's) advice because of what I see as important parts of "my work."

Labor Day is a good time to think about the patterns of our working lives. Ostensibly, it is a day set apart to celebrate the central importance of work. But for those of us caught up in the demands of "our work," it is important that we devote time for reflection about what work means.

In my younger days as a Christian ethicist, I was convinced the most important thing to preach about our working lives was this: *Work is more than an economic activity*. I still think that is an important piece of guidance. But most of the driven people I know do not seem to be motivated primarily by the desire to make money. Indeed, pastors who counsel "new economy" types tell me that many of these folks feel awkward about their newly gained wealth. They don't want to adopt ostentatious lifestyles. They are interested in giving money to good causes. What keeps them going is not the profit motive, but creative impulses and a fascination with risk-taking.

What many of us need these days is to reflect on a much broader maxim: *Life is more than work*. This is what the biblical Sabbath is all about. Keeping regular days of rest is not an arbitrary divine mandate. God himself rested after six days of divine "labor" in creating the world.

Work is an important part of what the Creator meant for us to be and do. But we weren't designed to have it permeate all of our lives. Play, sleep, conversation, courtship, the marital bedroom, cultivating friendships, simply "wasting time"--all of these are important elements in the rhythms of healthy living. This emphasis on integrated living is actually at the heart of "the Protestant ethic," even though that pattern has often been seen as responsible for much of our zeal for work--and even though the teaching is also central to Catholic and Jewish views of the good life as well.

A number of social commentators in recent years have insisted that democracy and capitalism, while very good things in their accounts of healthy human existence, are not self-sustaining. Each of them--as well as "democratic capitalism," the combination of the two--will ultimately self-destruct if not undergirded by a value system that features the importance of character, goodwill, honesty, thrift, charity, and other virtues. These virtues are sadly lacking in many of the countries that are now embracing the free market after a long and debilitating obsession with Marxism.

Those of us who live in cultures where democracy and capitalism flourish have an obligation to export not only our political and economic theories, but also the values and worldviews that are

necessary to sustain the good life. We cannot export that which we ourselves do not possess in abundance. Labor Day is a time to put things into perspective again.